

THE EVENING WORLD'S COMPLETE NOVELETTE

HIGH EXPLOSIVE

By Sophie Kerr
Illustrated by Will B. Johnstone.

The Female of the Species vs. The Predatory Male.



WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

CYRUS HOOPER, member of Congress, a man who tried to see the right and fought for it.
GENEVA HOOPER, his wife and helpmate, who shared her husband's beliefs and ambitions to the limit.
RYERSON, a State boss, whose opposition to Hooper recognized no bounds of decency, determined to put over a deal that Hooper thought dishonorable.
TILLIE FLETCHER, one of the instruments chosen by Ryonson for the deeds of darkness his course made necessary.
SENATOR TITCOMB, who came near to being a tool for Ryonson.
CONGRESSMAN BRUSH, also used by Ryonson in his fight against Hooper.



HERE is only one world over, he is still a Real Person, and as human as they're made. But when he dives into the past and salvages the picturesque days of his youth and poverty then, then is he the joy of all good listeners.

We had been talking idly of the changes of recent years, and some one asked him, curiously, whether or not he was an advocate of women in politics.

And then he told us this story: All I've got now I'd exchange on the instant to live over again the time when I was scrambling through my law courses, living on two meals a day. The queer part of it was that I thought it was fun even then.

But once pneumonia got me, and I was taken to a hospital. My real ordeal began when I was discharged as cured, too weak to do more than stagger along, without a cent in my pocket and hardly a friend in the city. I went out into a November sleet storm and, after I'd dragged myself a block or two, fell unconscious on the street.

I dropped down on the very steps of Cyrus Hooper's house, and Mrs. Cyrus came out and found me. A beautiful, big red-headed woman she was, with a heart as big and as open as the plains of her native State. She picked me up herself—I didn't weigh very much after pneumonia—and she carried me into the house and put me down on a sofa, wrapped me in blankets and tried to give me something hot to drink.

When I came to, there she was, leaning over me. "You poor kid," she said. "Lie still. Don't try to talk."

Then I heard her speaking to some one in the room. "Cy," she said, "I just wish you'd look at this boy. I found him fallen down in front of the house. I've sent for the doctor—I don't know what's the matter with him, but he looks half starved and sick enough to be in bed."

"My good Geneva," a man's voice answered, "you don't know but he's got the smallpox."

"He hasn't got the smallpox," she answered, with a sort of laugh in her voice, "because if he had, he'd be spotted."

She came to my side and I managed to gasp out that I'd just come from a hospital, where I'd had pneumonia, and that I'd be all right in a few minutes.

"There now, Cy," she said triumphantly, "you see—he hasn't got the smallpox. He's wasted away to skin and bone, the poor boy. Here, slip an arm under his head and we'll carry him upstairs."

I can hear her voice yet—deep and warm, with a sort of sweet menace in it, like the murmur inside a violin when the strings are touched very gently.

She and Cyrus carried me upstairs and put me to bed, and I stayed right there for a week. Mrs. Hooper nursed me and found out everything about me—past, present and future. Naturally, as soon as I was well enough, she took my life in hand and arranged it for me.

I was to stay right there, in her house, and be Cy's private secretary when I wasn't working at my studies. I could help Junior in some of the studies which he found hardest. I was to occupy a little room in the third story of their little cramped house, and I was to have all my meals with them.

I didn't resist her, not for a moment, for my heart with flinches had frightened me. I made all sorts of good resolutions about how I'd buckle down to my studies and what I'd do for the woman who'd rescued me from death, or worse.

now and then comes with red hair—that creamy, delicious color that makes a beautiful red-headed woman more beautiful than any other. Her lips were very red and her eyes were brown. I could rave on about her for hours. There never was any one like her. She was impulsive and generous, yet level-headed. She was interested in every new reform movement. She knew the whole game of politics through and through, as well as Cyrus did, yet she was what is called a home woman, and what a cook! Old-fashioned things, you know, that nobody ever hears of nowadays.

Well, the reason why Cyrus needed the services of a secretary was this: Quite contrary to the usual precedent, he had been appointed to two committees, one very important and desirable—Public Lands—for a Western man, that is, and one fairly so—Mines and Mining. This brought Cyrus into the limelight, and naturally his work increased with his importance. He was not fooled by it, however. He was a cautious man and shrewd, besides which, he had been more or less in State politics all his life.

He and Geneva talked it over, as they talked over everything. "There's something fishy about it," said Cyrus, "but as yet I haven't been able to find out what it is. It'll develop sooner or later."

"Probably sooner," said Geneva. "In the mean time, you've got a chance to make yourself known—and get. Cy, it must be Ryonson—Public Lands and Mines, you know. Oh, isn't it infamous that a man like him should have his dirty paws on a big, glorious State like ours, and to think that he believes that you will play his game for him?"

"Easy, Gen," cautioned Hooper. "He's got no reason to think that I'm anything but an organization man. If he thought differently—well, I wouldn't be here in Washington—you know that."

"You've never fought him because you've never had to," she replied. "But that doesn't mean that you won't when you have to. Now, does it?"

"You know it doesn't," said he. "That's the worst of politics," she mused. "You've got to work with such abominable tools to get anywhere or anything."

"It's not only the worst of politics," said Hooper. "It's the worst of life, but we're here to give Ryonson an awful run for his money when he shows his hand. And then I'm going back home and make my next campaign on a clean platform. And I'll win."

THAT was the first conversation that let me see where they stood, and the thing about it that interested me most, youngster that I was, was that they didn't fool themselves about anything—they knew their possibilities and their difficulties, and there was no great man bunk lurking in the mind of either of them. That's the kind that goes far—mark my words. That's the kind of Americans we ought to breed.

Ryonson I'd hitler known about only vaguely. He was a State boss, the old type. He played a long, waiting game, and he had a certain ferocious elemental strength that most men shrink from combat. A grizzly bear sort of man, morose, violent, always on the defensive, and cunning as a grizzly when he attacked.

Gathering all this about Ryonson, and desperately grateful to Geneva Hooper, you can imagine with what partisan ardor I threw myself into the cause of Cyrus Hooper. I was his slave, his pack-horse—in so far as he'd let me be. Nothing was too much, nothing too difficult. Old Tammam Carlyle knew what he was talking about when he said that "Great men, taken up in any way, are profitable company." Hooper was a great man in many ways, and knowing him and making him my hero, I steeled myself to work and study and decent living as nothing else had ever seemed to me.

There was plenty of work for me, too, for the appointment to the two committees made Hooper a man much talked of, and a man much in demand by all the various party interests. His appointment served notice on the world that person intended that he should be re-elected, and that he was to be reckoned with in a big way. His future was made—if he went right. Right meant Ryonson's way. Very few people suspected Hooper of determined, powerful honesty, and most of them would not have trusted him so much if they had suspected him of it.

Cyrus made no parade of his inner self. He went his way, cautiously and decently, as he always had done, and very carefully. And, in the mean time, he and Geneva and I and Junior—a nice boy the youngster was—lived in the little, unfashionable, home-like house in the wilds of Washington. I had a desk and a decrepit old typewriter in the back parlor—and that was Hooper's office.

I WAS sitting there pounding away one day when the door opened and Hooper came home from a session at the House. Through my work I got the feeling that there was chained lightning in the room. The place was filled up with beating waves of violent human anger and combativeness. My hands dropped off the keys and I looked up to see Hooper's face, torn

and ravaged by all the emotions with which he had electrically charged the room, and yet implacably still and set. He just stood there a minute or two, and then he lifted his head and called "Geneva"—and though he didn't call loud, it went all through the house.

She came downstairs instantly. She didn't even stop to lay down her pen, which she carried in her hands, a piece of red stuff, like blood—and she held it clamped to her breast in a frightened way.

"Yes—yes—what is it?" she called. Hooper sat down suddenly, as though the mere sight of her had relaxed all his tension. "The fight's on, Gen," he said, "Ryonson's here."

"Oh—h," she said, and that warm, rippling voice of hers fairly sighed with relief. "RYERSON—I thought you had hurt yourself—or were sick."

"What did he come for?" she asked. "He's not only the worst of politics," said Hooper. "It's the worst of life, but we're here to give Ryonson an awful run for his money when he shows his hand. And then I'm going back home and make my next campaign on a clean platform. And I'll win."

"That's the whole of the Ulland Hills district," said Hooper. "He's got it all sewed up in a sack ready to carry off. The committee has merely to report favorably on his bill and he'll have the whole thing—60,000 acres."

"But, Cy," she interposed, "he can't get the part where the settlers are."

"That's the diabolical part of it, honey," said Cy. "Not one of those folks has got a clear title. They don't own their own homes that they've literally made. Mt. bit, any more than you own the middle of the street out there. Ryonson's found that there are good mining prospects there, and so he's asking Uncle Sam to turn out this little lot of pioneers and give the lands to him. The preliminaries are all framed up. The way's been greased in the House, and I dare say in the Senate, since that old gray rat, Titcomb, is in it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Geneva. "I don't know—it's intangible. But when you're after a man like Ryonson, you don't go into a decent, straightforward, stand-up and knock-down fight. You fight slime—and villainous—and unspeakable things. If he does anything either to you or Junior I'll—"

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"I'm not afraid for myself," said Hooper. "He can't get anything on me. But—" "What are you afraid of then?" asked Geneva.

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man; Ryonson was one of the old guard, and had a reputation everywhere. Many a man who would have been glad to vote with Hooper was warned by interests in his own State not to interfere with Ryonson. The situation finally resolved itself into a deadlock. Ryonson had pulled every wire he knew, and he had a good line-up. Hooper felt pretty certain that the greater part of the minority party would stand by him, if for no other reason than to harass and annoy the majority. And, of course, he had friends in the majority party. But did he have enough? There was still that fatal doubt. But it was going to be far too close a vote for Ryonson's

And I tell you, I'm going to have my rights—I'm going to let the whole world know what sort of a man Cyrus Hooper is. Her voice got higher and higher—sobbing, hysterical, tortured.

"Is that so?" came Geneva's voice, still quiet and soft. There was the sound of a light scuffle, and then Geneva called out:

"Jimmie—come here—quick!" It was in that door with one bound. Geneva was holding the woman, with her arms pinned to her sides, by the simple trick of turning her coat back and down.

"Tear off one of this woman's nails and tie it across her mouth, so she can't make a noise," said Geneva; and I did.

"Give me your handkerchief," commanded Geneva, and with that she tied the woman's hands behind her back.

"Sit down," she said, forcing her prisoner into a chair. Then she coolly unbuckled a leather belt the stranger was wearing and used that to buckle the woman's feet to the chair.

This done, Geneva walked deliberately over to the little coal grate and laid the poker in among the hot coals. "What are you going to do?" I stammered.

"Put her through the third degree," said Geneva, quite amiably. "Go get a notebook and pencil, Jimmie. You must take down every word."

The woman was writhing around and trying to get her hands free. Her eyes were rolling at us wickedly. "Better sit still," said Geneva. "You can't get that knot untied."

I had come back with notebook and pencil by this time, and my hands were shaking dreadfully. "Give me the notebook," commanded Geneva. "You get that poker out of the coals."

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was a bold, silly sort. I take it, and had always loved excitement, no matter what it was. Later she lived in the city and there, somehow, she got to know Ryonson. He'd employed her to do just this same thing before, but I don't believe Ryonson would have been incautious enough to use her on Hooper if it hadn't been for the fortuitous circumstances of their early acquaintance. There, you see, he thought he had him.

She had forged letters in her possession—a perfect sheet of them—and by advancing her boy's age a year or so, he might have been Hooper's child. Oh, yes, she HAD a child. She was prepared to give these forged letters to the Washington newspapers and to go to any length, as she said, to prove her claim.

"I suppose," Geneva said, after she'd extracted all these facts just told you from the Fletcher person, "that when you've done this sort of thing before, the wife whose husband you'd come to injure went to pieces and cried and made a scene, didn't they?"

"They certainly did," said Tillie. "One of 'em told me she'd always suspected her husband anyway and it was no surprise to her."

"It's women like her," said Geneva. "That make your business easy."

"Say," asked Tillie, "what're you going to do with me?"

"I don't know yet," said Geneva. "First of all, you've got to sign this confession."

"Don't make me do that," she broke out. "Ryonson'll kill me—he'll KILL me."

Geneva turned on her fiercely. With her red hair and her blazing eyes, she might have been a Valkyrie bent on vengeance. "I'll kill you, if you don't," she said. "I don't care what I do to you, you—"

She stopped and caught her breath. "I'm going to untie your hands," she went on more calmly, "and let you sign this, and then I'm going to tie you up again and make up my mind what to do with you. And don't try to get away, or I'll put your eyes out. Here, Jimmie, give me that poker, and you hold the paper while she signs."

Hard as she was, Tillie Fletcher shrank before Geneva's glare. She signed the paper, meekly, and submitted to being retied.

I've sent for the head of the Associated Press Bureau and for every man who represents a really big newspaper in Washington. They're on their way to my house now, and when they get there I'm going to show Tillie Fletcher to them and give them her confession to print. I'm going to have a lawyer there, too, to decide how you can be most fully prosecuted. I'm going to run you out of the State, you dirty dog. You'll never be able to go back there when they know what you've tried to do to the wife of a decent man. They'll lynch you. Now you've got just one chance. Do you want to hear it, or do you think you can keep on fighting after this?"

Ryonson stood there, measuring her with his steady old eyes. He knew that he'd run up against a new proposition. At last he dropped his hand heavily to the table.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked. "First, those forged letters," commanded Geneva.

"I haven't got them."

"It's a lie. They are locked up in the table drawer."

He sucked in his breath and stared at her, meditating.

"I'll give you one minute," said Geneva, "otherwise I go back to show Tillie Fletcher and her confession to the newspaper men."

SHE put her hand back on the knob of the door, as if she were going. The old man slowly brought out a key, unlocked the table drawer and produced a big stuffed envelope, tied and sealed.

"Put it down on the table and stand back from it," said Geneva. He did so and she went swiftly forward, picked it up and retreated again to her place beside the door.

"Now," said Geneva, "if you want to save your worthless life, you sit down there and write a letter to my husband. Tell him that you have found yourself in the wrong about the Ulland Hills district; that you had no idea that your claim would dispose so many good citizens of their holdings, which, though not theirs according to the full letter of the law, yet should rightfully belong to them. Say that later investigations have proved to you that you are in the wrong. Tell him that you authorize him to withdraw your claim before the House Committee, and that you have written to Senator Titcomb to do the same before the Senate Committee. Tell him that you have and respect him for the brave stand he has taken and that you feel that every man in the State owes him a debt of gratitude for the way he has represented the interests of those poor settlers, who had no protection before the law. Put it on THICK, d'you hear me? It's your only chance. And don't waste any time about it."

In the end, Ryonson wrote what she wanted. Then she demanded that another letter, confirming this one, should be written to Senator Titcomb. She took both the letters when he had finished them.

"I'll give these to the newspaper men instead of Tillie's confession," she said to the old man, who sat in speechless, glowering rage. "As for you—listen to me. You lift one finger against me, Hooper—you dare to deny one of my forged letters—you put just one small obstacle in the way of Cyrus Hooper's future—and I'll go on the stump myself through the whole State and tell this story and show my proofs. You can play politics with the men, and get away with all sorts of things; but when you play politics with women, you're up against high explosives. Tillie Fletcher's story will be kept ready to spring on you until you're dead. I shall see to THAT. I'll give it to every big newspaper in this country with directions to print it if you keep to your agreement here. Remember that."

She put one hand behind her, twisted the door open and got outside. She got home a minute or two before the end of the hour, and maybe I wasn't glad to see her come in. Tillie Fletcher had used every word in the language to persuade me to let her go—ranging from caletory to threats and profanity. She made my blood run cold with some of the things she said.

Naturally Geneva didn't lose any time getting Ryonson's letter to Hooper into his hands, and Titcomb's into his, and in giving out the information to the newspapers. It was a splendid victory for Hooper, of course. Every one played him up as the coming man. It gave him his first big boost upward. He's kept on climbing. A fine chap, Hooper—a real American.

Tillie Fletcher? Oh, that's funny. She was horribly afraid of Ryonson, and begged Geneva not to turn her out. And Geneva let the woman stay in her house for a week or more, made her help with the cooking and housework, and finally got her off to New York to a friend of hers, who found work for her.

But you know—the whole business now! How perfectly, how beautifully feminine! Which is to say—elemental. But since that time I have not been much concerned whether women are in politics or not. Why worry? They can always get what they want, anyhow.